

Exploring the Application of Mo Shi Wen Symbols in the Design of Cultural Derivatives

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Abstract

As an integral part of human civilization, traditional culture faces the risk of being lost, marginalized, or even forgotten in modern society. The Dong ethnic group, one of China's 56 officially recognized ethnic minorities, possesses a rich cultural heritage. A defining feature of Dong culture is its exceptional wooden architecture, characterized by intricate designs and sophisticated construction techniques that hold both practical and symbolic significance. Among these architectural elements, the "Mo Shi Wen" stands out as a particularly significant cultural symbol. Efforts to preserve and revitalize the "Mo Shi Wen" and other aspects of Dong heritage require innovative approaches that integrate modern design with traditional symbols. This study focuses on the application of Mo Shi Wen symbols in the design of cultural derivatives. To achieve this, the research includes interviews with experts, designers, consumers, and related researchers. Furthermore, the findings offer new perspectives on the protection of traditional culture and provide a practical reference for the application of modern design concepts in cultural communication. In the future, the effective integration of traditional cultural elements with contemporary design principles will further safeguard and promote the inheritance and development of traditional culture.

Keywords: Mo Shi Wen, Symbol Design, Cultural Derivatives

Introduction

Both intangible and tangible cultural heritage, characterized by uniqueness, rarity, and irreproducibility, should receive equal attention and be safeguarded by all of humanity (Labadi, 2024). Santa and Tiatco (2019) defines heritage as "passed from one generation to the next, something that can be conserved or inherited, and something that has historic or cultural value." Similarly, Timothy (2018) believe that an inheritance from the past that is valued and utilized today, and what we hope to pass on to future generations. The adoption of the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage formally differentiates tangible cultural heritage from intangible cultural heritage, recognizing the significance of the intangible dimension within cultural heritage (Keitumetse, 2006). Given the widespread commitment to cultural heritage preservation, the pressing threats of its decline, and the

social necessity for cultural diversity, Hou et al. (2022) identifies language expression, artistic performance, social customs, knowledge, and traditional crafts as the primary elements of intangible cultural heritage. These growing concerns have drawn increased global attention to the value of cultural heritage.

As one of the most populous countries with one of the longest continuous histories, China has gained international recognition for the diversity of its intangible cultural heritage (Helen, 2016). Research on the value and significance of intangible cultural heritage has become an important focus in academic discourse (Alivizatou, 2008; Melis & Chambers, 2021). The Dong ethnic group possesses a rich cultural heritage deeply intertwined with its natural and social environment. A defining feature of Dong culture is its exceptional wooden architecture, distinguished by intricate designs and sophisticated construction techniques that embody both practical and symbolic significance (Dong & binti Jamali, 2024; Wang & Zakaria, 2025). Among these architectural elements, the Mo Shi Wen stands out as a particularly important cultural feature. Mo Shi Wen refers to the symbols used by skilled Dong artisans, known as Zhang Mo Shi, during the construction process (Zhang, 2024). These symbols, comprising 13 distinct characters, are typically inscribed on a specialized measuring tool called Jiang Gan and on various wooden components of buildings (Chen, 2024). Mo Shi Wen symbols encapsulate the cultural identity of the Dong community, reflecting their historical traditions and social philosophies. These symbols function as an encoded visual language, conveying the collective memory and aesthetic values of the Dong people.

Despite its historical significance, Mo Shi Wen faces considerable challenges in contemporary society. The rapid advancement of globalization and industrialization has introduced unprecedented pressures on cultural traditions (Friedmann, 2005; Raikhan et al., 2014). As an integral part of human civilization, traditional culture is increasingly at risk of being lost, marginalized, or even forgotten in modern society. The forces of modernization, global integration, and shifting social values have contributed to a decline in traditional practices, including architectural craftsmanship (Ugah et al., 2024). Many younger members of the Dong community, influenced by urbanization and modern education, exhibit a diminishing interest in mastering these ancestral skills. Furthermore, the absence of formal documentation and the limited academic research on Mo Shi Wen further threaten its continuity as an essential component of Dong cultural heritage (Li, 2024).

Preserving and revitalizing Mo Shi Wen and other aspects of Dong heritage necessitate innovative strategies that integrate traditional symbols into modern contexts. Modern design, as an interdisciplinary art form, is not only a means of material product innovation but also a vital tool for cultural expression and dissemination (Galchynska et al., 2023). Through design, the core values, historical memory, and cultural sentiments embedded in traditional heritage can be transformed into visual language, facilitating renewed recognition and understanding among younger generations. The fusion of traditional culture with contemporary design is not merely a necessity for cultural inheritance but also an inevitable trajectory for cultural innovation and development (Liu et al., 2025). This integration can breathe new life into traditional culture while simultaneously imbuing modern design with profound cultural significance.

This study addresses these challenges by exploring the application of Mo Shi Wen symbols in the design of cultural derivatives. It aims to explore how Mo Shi Wen symbols are applied in cultural product design, emphasizing their aesthetic and functional roles. Unlike previous studies that focus on the historical significance of Mo Shi Wen, this research investigates their transformation into cultural derivatives.

The contributions of this paper are as follows: (1) Cultural expression integrating heritage and innovation. The creative transformation of traditional culture has been successfully achieved by adapting the traditional customs and artistic forms (such as costumes and festival decorations) of Mo Shi wen into modern visual products. This approach not only preserves the diversity of minority cultures but also revitalizes them, imbuing them with contemporary significance and dynamism; (2) Promoting the synergistic development of cultural and creative industries and the community economy. By developing visual derivatives embedded with cultural meaning, this case study fosters the growth of local cultural and creative industries. Moreover, this business model provides a novel pathway for the economic development of ethnic minority regions, demonstrating how cultural resources can drive sustainable economic growth; (3) Enhancing cultural participation and identity among community members. In the process of developing Mo Shi wen's cultural derivatives, community members actively participate in the creation of cultural products, strengthening their cultural confidence and sense of belonging. At the same time, this engagement cultivates their creative abilities and fosters innovation within the cultural and creative industries. (4) Exploring a sustainable cultural-economic model. Through the development and promotion of Mo Shi wen's cultural derivatives, this research successfully achieves a balance between cultural and economic value, offering valuable insights for the sustainable development of ethnic minority regions. This model can be extended to the preservation and commercial development of other ethnic cultures, providing a meaningful reference for broader applications.

Literature review of Mo Shi Wen

Concepts and origins of Mo Shi Wen

Mo Shi Wen refers to the written symbols developed by Dong carpenters in the past. During the construction process, Mo Shi Wen was exclusively used as a notation system to document the placement of wooden components (Fang et al., 2024). Specifically, it indicated where holes should be cut and where tenons and mortises were to be made, detailing their precise locations.

Mo Shi Wen symbols encapsulate the cultural identity of the Dong community, reflecting their historical traditions and social philosophies. These symbols function as an encoded visual language, conveying the collective memory and aesthetic values of the Dong people. The Zhang Mo Shi play a crucial role in the construction process, including designing architectural plans, estimating materials, supervising preparations, crafting and assembling large wooden components, coordinating labor, and ensuring quality control and project progress (Figures 1 and 2). Before commencing a construction project, they conduct site visits to take measurements and, based on the topographical features and functional requirements, determine the shape and structural framework of the building. Through precise calculations and measurements, they manually create a proportionally scaled-down architectural model. Once the design process is complete, they use Mo Shi Wen to label materials, enabling other

construction workers to accurately interpret and execute the architectural plans (Shen et al., 2022).



Figure 1. Zhang Mo Shi writes Mo Shi Wen to mark the position of the component in the entire building

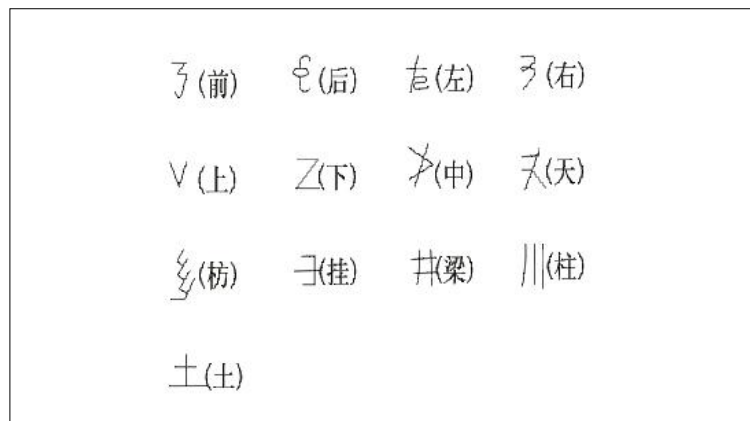


Figure 2. Translations of Mo Shi Wen

Azimuth Symbols of Mo Shi Wen

The symbols depicted in Figure 3 represent the meaning of "front," indicating that the engraved material should be placed at the front.



Figure 3. The front symbol in Mo Shi Wen

The symbols depicted in Figure 4 represent the meaning of "back", indicating that the engraved material should be placed at the back.



Figure 4. The back symbol in Mo Shi Wen

The symbols depicted in Figure 5 represent the meaning of "middle", indicating that the engraved material should be placed in the middle.



Figure 5. The middle symbol in Mo Shi wen

The symbols depicted in Figure 6 represent the meaning of "beam", indicating that the carving material is used to make the beams of the house.



Figure 6. The beam symbol in Mo Shi wen

Factors Contributing to the Decline of Mo Shi Wen

However, Mo Shi Wen has been gradually fading from contemporary practice. The decline in demand for Zhang Mo Shi, the master carpenters responsible for leading Dong construction projects, has significantly contributed to this phenomenon. Traditionally, the construction of a Dong building required the coordinated efforts of multiple carpenters, led by a Zhang Mo Shi. This master carpenter oversaw the structural planning, procurement of materials, and overall execution of the project. Proficient in Mo Shi Wen, the Zhang Mo Shi used this specialized script to pre-mark each pillar, guiding other carpenters on where to drill holes and how to proceed with construction. As a unique system developed specifically for Dong architecture, Mo Shi Wen was understood exclusively by Zhang Mo Shi and skilled Dong carpenters. Consequently, the dramatic decline in the number of Zhang Mo Shi—driven by reduced market demand—has rendered Mo Shi Wen increasingly obsolete, pushing it toward extinction (Mao, Li, & Mao, 2020). There are four main reasons.

1. Influence of Traditional Cultural Hierarchies

Historical records rarely document the succession of Mo Shi Wen carpenters. This omission can be attributed to the traditional Chinese occupational hierarchy, which

historically prioritized scholars over craftsmen. As a result, the heirs of Mo Shi Wen, who were primarily villagers and manual laborers with limited formal education, were regarded as less prestigious than scholars. Despite their remarkable skills and contributions, Dong carpenters remained largely overlooked in academic discourse, and their names rarely appeared in historical records, even though their craftsmanship was meticulously passed down through generations (Cheng, 1997).

2. Abandonment due to the Modern Architectural System

The introduction of Western architectural practices further marginalized the traditional succession of Dong carpenters. While this shift elevated the status of modern architects, it simultaneously excluded Mo Shi Wen carpenters from professional recognition. Lacking formal education in modern construction techniques and official qualifications, these skilled craftsmen—who had long been responsible for the design and construction of Dong buildings—were no longer acknowledged within the evolving architectural framework. Consequently, they were forced to abandon large-scale urban projects and retreat to rural areas, where they continued working on small-scale residential constructions. Over time, the dominance of urban construction led to the near disappearance of Mo Shi Wen carpentry traditions (Mao, Li, & Mao, 2020).

3. Impact of the Urban Modern Construction Model

China's rapid urbanization has led to the dominance of modern construction methods, overshadowing traditional rural architecture. The widespread use of reinforced concrete and glass curtain walls in cities has resulted in a homogenized urban landscape, stripping regions of their distinctive architectural characteristics. Influenced by urban culture and economic development, rural villagers began favoring Western-style homes, often imitating city buildings. As their construction preferences shifted, the heirs of Mo Shi Wen carpenters—despite their exceptional craftsmanship—could no longer meet the growing demand for modern aesthetics and Western-style housing. Consequently, the traditional construction model and its associated cultural heritage were left without a sustainable foothold (Cheng, 1997).

4. Collapse of the Traditional Rural Cultural System

The decline of Mo Shi Wen culture is also closely tied to the disintegration of traditional rural cultural structures. In the past, clan leaders and local gentry played a crucial role in preserving and transmitting cultural heritage, maintaining historical records, and upholding rural traditions. However, rapid urban economic growth created a siphon effect, drawing skilled laborers—including clan leaders and gentry—away from rural communities and into urban areas. As these key figures departed, the traditional rural cultural system disintegrated. With the loss of clan records and oral histories, the heirs of Dong carpenters also lost crucial documentation of their family legacies and cultural traditions, further accelerating the erosion of Mo Shi Wen heritage.

Methodology

As an integral part of Dong traditional culture, Mo Shi Wen symbols hold significant potential for application in modern design. Exploring their use in cultural derivative design can not only promote Dong culture but also serve as a valuable reference for symbol design innovation. Therefore, this study investigates the practical applications of Mo Shi Wen

symbols in cultural derivative design and evaluates their impact through interviews. The interviewees include Mo Shi Wen experts, designers specializing in cultural derivatives—particularly those focusing on Dong culture—consumers, and related researchers, totaling 16 participants. The specific objectives of the interviews are as follows: (1) To understand the inspiration and design concepts behind Mo Shi Wen symbols; (2) To identify the challenges encountered in the design process and the corresponding solutions; (3) To assess market acceptance and consumer feedback regarding Mo Shi Wen symbols; (4) To analyse the potential for innovative applications of Mo Shi Wen symbols in cultural derivatives. The interview content covers the following content: (1) The design philosophy of Mo Shiwen and its influence on cultural derivative design; (2) Approaches to integrating cultural heritage with commercialization in Mo Shi Wen design; (3) Consumer cultural recognition and market reception of Mo Shi Wen symbols; (4) Existing challenges in Mo Shi Wen design and suggestions for improvement.

Design of Mo Shi Wen symbol

The Combination Design of Mo Shi Wen Symbols and Dong Embroidery

This study is based on the real photo of Mo Shi Wen, and designs the symbol "Fang" in Mo Shi Wen using professional drawing software Photoshop on the computer, exploring the design practice of combining this symbol with Dong culture.



Figure 7. The 'Fang' symbol in Mo Shi Wen

The symbols depicted in Figure 7 represent the meaning of "Fang", it generally refers to a square pillar-shaped piece of wood, and in the Mo Shi Wen, it represents the use of this carved material for cross rails, handrails, etc.



Figure 8. Display of the butterfly Motif in Dong Embroidery



Figure 9. Display of flower Motifin Dong Embroidery

Because the Chinese words 'butterfly' and 'Stacks of Bliss' have the same sound, the butterfly in Dong embroidery Therefore, the butterfly in Dong embroidery symbolises the idea of continuous accumulation of good fortune and longevity. Butterflies have a beautiful image and a dynamic posture, and they are also characterised by their beautiful forms. Flowers in Dong embroidery symbolise beauty and prosperity. It shows the love and blessing of life and brings life and hope to the people.



Figure 10. The visual representation of the 'Middle' symbol of Mo Shi Wen

Considering the visual structure arrangement, the first author combined the butterfly, lotus, and copper coin flower patterns in Dong embroidery to form the symbol design of the character "Fang" in the Mo script. As shown in the red box in Figure 10, in this design practice, these two themes have been distilled into their symbolic forms. It can be said that this design connects the cultural elements of the Dong ethnic group and creates a unique visual representation of Dong culture. In Figure 11, all symbols of Mo Shi Wen are designed and combined in this way, and then presented through posters for use in cultural dissemination, especially in the local tourism industry, which allows more people to experience Mo Shi Wen.



Fig 11. Poster design of Mo Shi Wen calligraphy symbols combined with Dong Embroidery

The Combination Design of Mo Shi Wen Symbols and Dong Ethnic Folk Elements

Figure 12 shows two elements of Dong ethnic folk culture: one is the unique wooden residential buildings of the Dong ethnic group, and the other is the tea picking Dong women wearing Dong ethnic costumes.

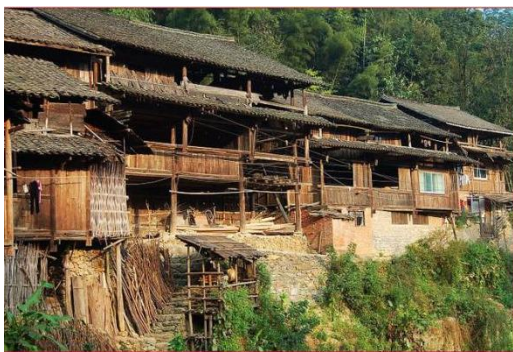


Figure 12. Mo Shi Wen symbols and Dong Ethnic folk elements

The symbol designed by the first author (Figure 13) is primarily composed of four key elements of Dong culture. As highlighted in the red box, the first element represents men and women dressed in traditional Dong attire engaged in tea picking and processing. The second element features Dong wooden houses, a hallmark of their architectural heritage. The third element is the dragon totem, a significant cultural symbol in Dong traditions. The Dong people believe that dragons bring favorable weather, abundant harvests, and symbolize auspiciousness and happiness. Dragon motifs frequently appear in traditional festivals and celebrations, such as dragon dance performances, where people invoke the dragon's protection and pray for a safe and prosperous life. The fourth element is the butterfly totem commonly found in Dong silver jewelry. As mentioned earlier, the butterfly symbolizes layered blessings in Dong culture.

These elements collectively represent the customs and traditions of the Dong ethnic group. In designing this symbol, the first author employed bold strokes to ensure structural coherence, using golden lines to create intricate, multi-layered patterns. The Dong cultural elements are skillfully interwoven into the strokes, complemented by continuous,

symmetrical auspicious cloud patterns. All these patterns were meticulously extracted and designed by the first author.

In Figure 14, all Mo Shi Wen symbols are integrated into a comprehensive poster design. This visual font system can also be applied to packaging design, particularly for souvenirs sold at local tourist attractions. Such applications help promote Dong culture to a broader audience, effectively supporting cultural preservation and dissemination.

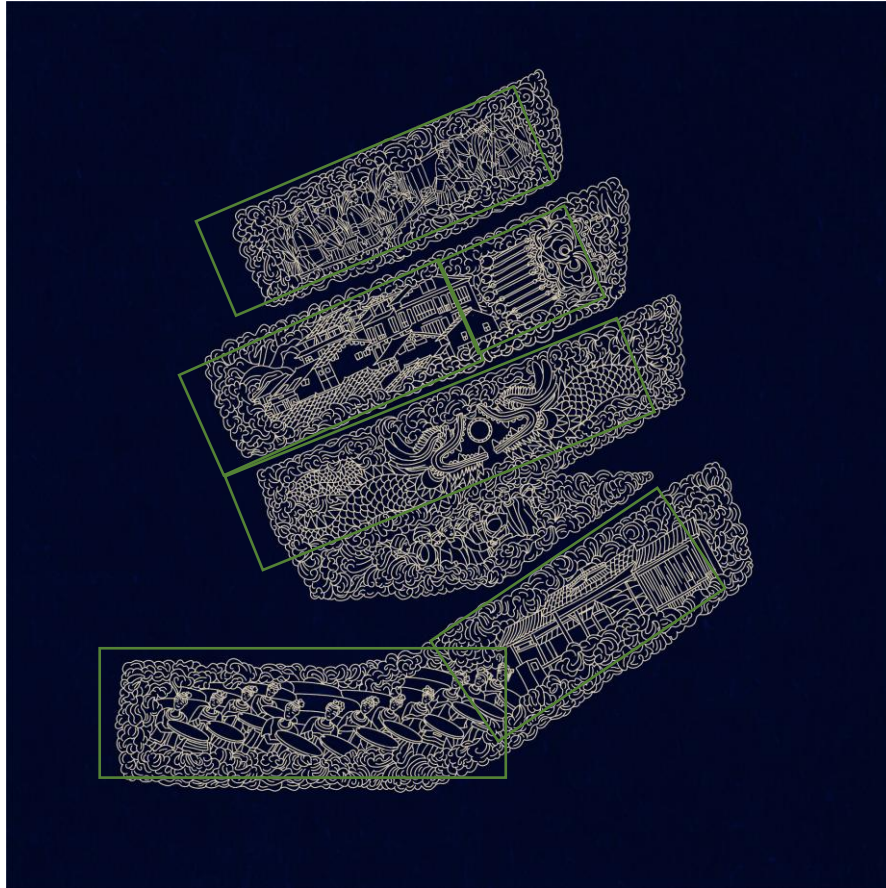


Figure 13. The visual representation of the 'Fang' symbol of Mo Shi Wen



Fig 14. Poster and applicable derivative

The Combination Design of Mo Shi Wen and Dong Ethnic Wooden Structures

The architectural framework of traditional Dong wooden structures, as illustrated in Figure 15, provided crucial inspiration for the primary author. This intricate three-dimensional configuration was adapted into the visual concept of the Mo Shi Wen character 'Fang,' emphasizing structural aesthetics and cultural continuity.



Figure 15. The wooden constructive structure of the Dong building

Figure 16 illustrates the design of the character "Fang" in Mo Shi Wen, which is inspired by the three-dimensional wooden framework characteristic of traditional Dong ethnic architecture. The integration of symbolic fonts with Dong architectural structures highlights

the traditional functional significance of Mo Shi Wen—a symbolic writing system used exclusively by Dong carpenters in the construction of Dong architecture.

The image on the right presents a symbol collection poster designed by the first author. This poster meticulously reconstructs the wooden architectural framework developed by Dong craftsmen and incorporates 13 characters from Mo Shi Wen. It serves as a visual representation of the connection between Dong ethnic architecture and Mohist culture. Designed for both educational and cultural purposes, the poster can be displayed at tourist attractions featuring Dong wooden structures, offering visitors insight into Dong architectural traditions. Additionally, it can be integrated into educational materials to teach future generations of the Dong community, thereby fostering cultural sustainability and heritage preservation.

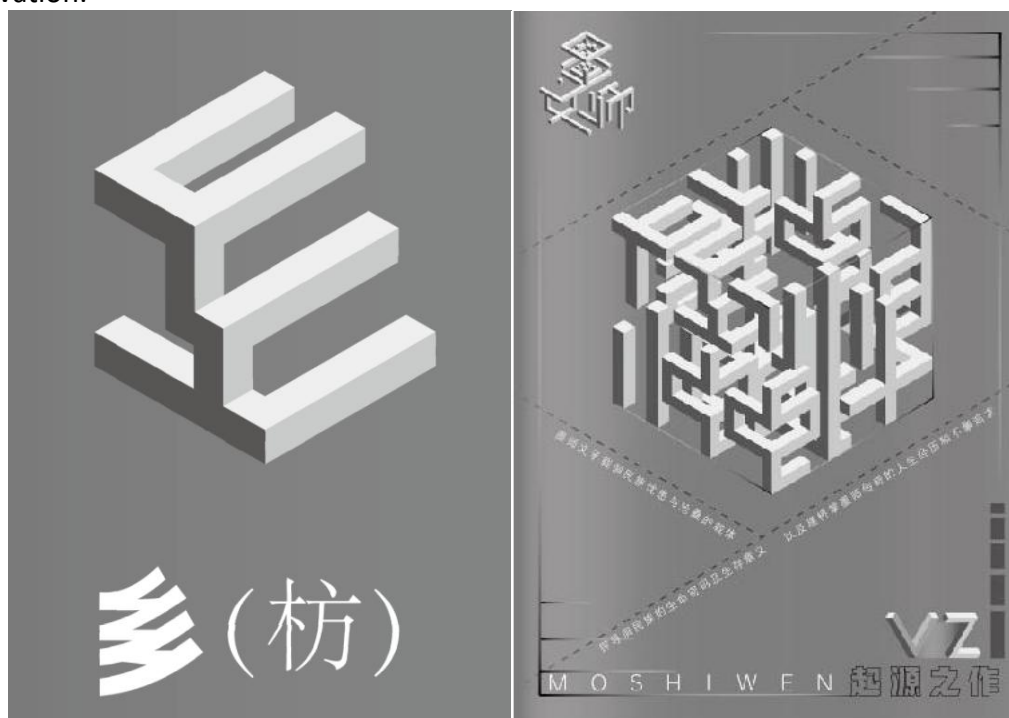


Figure 18. The visual representation of the 'Back' symbol of Mo Shi Wen and applicable derivative

Results and Discussions

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the importance of developing new cultural derivatives for the Dong community. This research required an investigation of two key aspects: first, the significance of preserving Dong culture, and second, the role of cultural derivatives as a means of heritage preservation. The interview questions were structured around these two dimensions, which serve as critical drivers in the design of new cultural derivatives for the Dong community. Specifically, the interviews examined the reasons for cultural decline, personal attitudes toward cultural preservation, and perceptions of culturally specific derivatives.

The findings identified multiple factors contributing to the decline of Dong culture, including sinicisation, limited economic returns, political interventions, inadequate cultural inheritance practices, and the absence of traditionally documented texts. As Muke Yang, an official in the Doujiang Township Government and one of the interviewees, explained, written

records on this subject are scarce, making it akin to assembling a puzzle with only a few scattered pieces. Even when rare documents emerge, they often read more like fragmented folk tales than a coherent historical account.

Beyond the reliance on oral tradition—where knowledge was transmitted verbally without written documentation—another significant factor was the pursuit of economic gain. The strong economic and cultural influence of urbanization led suburban villagers to embrace city life by constructing Western-style homes, often replicating urban architectural designs in great detail. As a result, the countryside is now scattered with a mix of ancient European styles, American aesthetics, and neoclassical buildings, contrasting starkly with the past. Traditional buildings with distinct regional traits and indigenous craftsmanship have become increasingly rare, struggling to survive in an environment dominated by modern Western-style designs and industrial construction methods. Consequently, the intricate Mo Shi Wen patterns that once adorned buildings have largely been replaced by contemporary designs.

Moreover, the difficulty in earning a sustainable livelihood deterred potential successors, further contributing to the decline of this once-thriving tradition. The emergence of a new architectural system in China marginalized skilled artisans who had long been responsible for designing, constructing, and managing architectural projects. Without formal academic credentials or industry certifications, Mo Shi Wen inheritors found themselves excluded from the modern construction industry. They were neither recognized as builders nor could they claim the title of architect within this transformed professional landscape. Lacking the necessary qualifications to adapt to the new system, these once-revered craftsmen were forced to retreat to rural areas, where they could only engage in small-scale residential construction. Over time, even these opportunities diminished as urban architectural trends permeated rural communities, further eroding traditional practices. Today, the legacy of Mo Shi Wen has nearly faded, with few, if any, inheritors left to continue its tradition.

Regarding the Dong community's attitudes toward their cultural heritage, the findings revealed a strong sense of cultural value and nostalgia for Mo Shi Wen. While many participants expressed a deep desire to preserve this unique tradition, they also recognized the challenges involved. Jianguo Wu, an official in the Guyi Township Government, shared his sentiments: "We deeply cherish and miss Mo Shi Wen culture; it is a treasure passed down by our ancestors. However, in underdeveloped areas like ours, there are no skilled professionals to create cultural derivatives. If someone could help us achieve this, it would be truly wonderful." Similarly, Wanbo Yang, an official in the Zhouping Township Government, articulated the collective expectations of the Dong people: "As Mo Shi Wen cultural derivatives continue to develop, they will inevitably enrich our cultural landscape. By incorporating Zhuang cultural elements into signage, posters, guidebooks, and packaging for local souvenirs, we can enhance the tourist experience, making it more immersive and meaningful. Additionally, offering culturally inspired souvenirs such as backpacks, notebooks, keychains, and phone cases at tourist destinations would not only add charm and practicality to visitors' purchases but also attract more tourists and stimulate the local economy, creating a mutually beneficial outcome for both the community and visitors."

Beyond examining modernization's impact on traditional culture, this study also explored the significance of culturally specific derivatives for the Dong community. The

findings revealed overwhelming support among Dong residents for the development of Mo Shi Wen derivatives, citing benefits such as cultural preservation, increased tourism, and enriched visitor experiences, all of which could generate economic opportunities. Notably, the research uncovered the Dong people's aspiration to leverage Mo Shi Wen derivatives as a means of integrating their heritage into modern life, fostering a positive cultural image, and sparking interest—especially among younger generations. This aligns with prior studies on tourism marketing, which suggest that cultural symbols, such as emojis, can enhance a destination's appeal and create favorable impressions among visitors, a concept known as destination marketing (Distel et al., 2022).

Conclusion

Given the uniqueness, rarity, and irreproducibility of Dong culture, it requires enhanced preservation efforts. This study employed qualitative interviews to examine the significance of developing new Mo Shi Wen derivatives for the Dong community. Thematic analysis was conducted to document the fading cultural elements, identify the underlying causes of their decline, and explore the attitudes of Dong community members toward Mo Shi Wen culture and culturally specific derivatives.

The primary factors contributing to the endangerment of Dong cultural traditions became evident through an analysis of the broader patterns of civilizational decline, with an additional factor being the absence of written documentation. This study identified Margaret Mead's concept of prefigurative culture as a key explanation for the challenges in cultural inheritance. In the Dong community, artistic traditions, particularly Mo Shi Wen, have undergone an inversion in transmission patterns. As a result of shifting toward a prefigurative cultural model—one that is future-oriented and in which cultural knowledge is primarily transmitted from younger generations to their elders—the community faces significant difficulties in preserving its heritage. This shift fundamentally deviates from traditional cultural preservation practices.

Furthermore, the thematic analysis revealed that, beyond merely safeguarding their cultural heritage, Dong community members also view cultural derivatives as a means of achieving economic benefits. The research highlights four essential functions of Mo Shi Wen derivatives: serving as a reliable supplement or alternative to written texts, facilitating cultural sustainability and dissemination, fostering positive perceptions of the region among outsiders, and enhancing local tourism. In response to the strong support expressed by Dong participants, this study initiated the creation of Mo Shi Wen cultural derivatives to address these needs.

In summary, this study highlights the integration of Mo Shi Wen symbols in cultural design, presenting a unique approach to preserving and innovating traditional Dong culture. Future research should explore interdisciplinary applications of Mo Shi Wen beyond visual derivatives.

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